

Gun



ON-SET
EXCLUSIVE!

fight

At The *E. T.* Corral

Think *Cowboys & Aliens* sounds a little silly? Put it another way, then: it's James Bond and Indiana Jones doing *Independence Day* in John Ford country. *Empire* gets ridiculously exclusive access to the New Mexico set of the ultimate genre mash-up in movie history

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN

I'VE HAD TO PUT OUT FAKE CALL SHEETS," STEVEN SPIELBERG TOLD *EMPIRE* ON THE SET OF *A.I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE*,

back in 2001. "We put out some pretty cockamamie descriptions of what we were shooting, filled with humorous disinformation. One day we said there was going to be a big shoot-out between aliens and cowboys. The next hour, it was on the internet."

Ten years later, it's on the internet again, except this time the call sheets are legit. Harrison Ford and Daniel Craig star in *Cowboys & Aliens* as two gunslingers facing down an invasion of star-slime—in 1873. *Iron Man*'s Jon Favreau directs. And on the producing porch, rocking back and forth on a metaphorical chair, is Spielberg.

"We know full well how ridiculous it sounds," laughs Roberto Orci, who wrote the shooting script along with *Star Trek* crewmate Alex Kurtzman and *Lost* architect Damon Lindelof. "The title is very catchy, but it also makes you wonder if it's a spoof or a cartoon. Some at the studio argued that we should change it. But it was immediately after hearing that title that the three of us went, 'Let's not dick around—we have to get our hands on that.'"

The premise is so perfectly nutzoid it's hard to believe it hasn't been done before. Except, in fact, it has. In an episode of 1960s TV serial *The Time Tunnel*, two aliens run amok in 1885 Arizona. In 1994 schlockbuster *Oblivion*, George Takei and Julie Newmar defend a frontier planet from lizard-monsters in the year 3031. The *Cowboys & Aliens* title was itself coined in 1995, by two comic-book artists who later sold it to writer Scott Mitchell Rosenberg. Although the new movie is nominally based on Rosenberg's series of campy graphic novels, it's very much its own beast.

Loneragan (Daniel Craig) and Dolarhyde (Harrison Ford) take cover.



Lawman Jon Favreau (right).



"There have been many attempts to get it right," says Favreau. "What we've decided to do is take the Western seriously. In recent years, movies have tried to spoof the genre and they've gone wrong: you lose all stakes. Instead, we've embraced it. And the tone, most of all, will be what this film lives or dies by."

AMONG THE MANY QUEUES AT COMIC-CON 2010, ONE IN PARTICULAR STOOD OUT. NOT THE KLINGONS LINING UP

for a jalapeño pretzel. Nor the bearded mass besieging Bola Ewok 3 in the autograph plaza. This one, in the backstage corridor of the

Han(d) Solo: Daniel Craig brandishes his blaster.

“Harrison is opinionated
but that’s a good thing.”

Jon Favreau

cavernous Hall H, was slightly more A-list.

At the front, Simon Pegg, Nick Frost and the other stars of *Paul*. At the back, Kenneth Branagh and his *Thor* crew. And in between, sleep-deprived after schlepping straight from a night shoot and as nervous as anyone, Favreau and his *Cowboys & Aliens* cast: Craig, Olivia Wilde, Sam Rockwell and Adam Beach. Oh, and Ford, the man who once claimed he would never voluntarily attend the San Diego geek rally. Naturally, he is handcuffed and escorted by two burly guards.

“The whole thing was fucking weird,” laughs Craig. “We were all stuffed in there, waiting to do our panels. Last time I’d seen Simon and Nick, they were squeezed into leotards on the *Tintin* set; I couldn’t look them in the eye. And then we heard

someone in the hall had been stabbed. With a pencil. A fucking nerd attack!”

Favreau had Han Solo and James Bond with which to placate the HB-wielding hordes. But he was still terrified. “They love aliens in there, but the Western is not a genre that crowd necessarily embraces,” the director says. “They’re very vocal and we could have been dismissed very quickly. It was a real gamble.”

As *Empire* can testify, having been sat between two wizards in the front row, *Cowboys & Aliens* beat the house. Hall H-ers, more accustomed to shrieking at spandex and sorcery, hushed up to watch ten minutes of slow-burning Old West action: hero Jake Lonergan (Craig) patching up a wound; sourpuss cattle baron Woodrow

Dolarhyde (Ford) snarling at the townsfolk of Absolution; then, finally, strange flickerings in the sky heralding a wheeling spacecraft, which Jake downs with a wrist-mounted blaster. Minimal dialogue, no nods, no winks, only one money shot. Still, when the lights went up, the room went ape-er than it had all weekend.

“We got so giddy,” Wilde recalls. “Sam and Adam put on masks and ran around the conference floor. Even Harrison, the golden goose, was stunned.”

“I was very pleased,” admits the man himself. “It was exciting.”

“It was a huge moment for us. We’d planted our flag and we weren’t made fun of,” says a relieved Favreau. “Now we had to live up to our promise. Believe it or not, that was four weeks into the shoot.” >

The searchers: Loneragan and Ella (Olivia Wilde) explore alien territory.



ONE MONTH LATER, ON A ROCKY RIDGE HIGH ABOVE THE NEW MEXICO DESERT, HARRISON FORD IS

looking for chickens. That's the term the actor has taken to using to refer to the aliens that descend on Absolution. On-screen, however, they'll be called "demons". The scene *Empire* is watching being shot comes late in the movie, just before the enormous final battle kicks off. Dolarhyde, Jake and others have tracked the creatures, which attacked their town through the desert. At one point, they find a huge, two-toed footprint. Now they've located the mothership and are executing a two-pronged plan to take it down. Jake and his gang will sneak up and drop dynamite into a vent, while Dolarhyde watches through a telescope and prepares to lead a charge against whatever comes spewing from the spacecraft.

At least, that's the idea. Ford, though, is unhappy. First he makes a request to take off his coat, which is denied due to his wearing it in a horse-fall stunt already shot. Then there's the matter of the guidance Favreau is giving him as he peers through the spyglass. "They're

climbing up... They're lighting charges... They're shimmying down... Now they're running... Explosion! The aliens are coming out! They're shooting!" whispers the director. Ford scowls and shakes his head. "There needs to be pauses between things. I didn't even get to the top and already they're shimmying down?" After five takes, and five controlled explosions down in the canyon, the pair retire to the monitor bank to talk privately. Sam Rockwell, on the fringes of the scene as barkeep Doc, sits on a boulder and twirls his pistol while he waits.

"Harrison is opinionated, but that's a good thing for the movie," says Favreau later. "The fact he's so attentive is probably why he's had the success he's had. And he likely knows more than most of the directors he works with. I think we're a really good combination of creative styles."

"Harrison's getting to be that bastard that he hasn't got to be in a film before," posits Adam Beach, who plays Dolarhyde's adopted Apache son. "Even us actors are surprised, because when he gets caught up in the moment and they say, 'Cut,' if he's still in character, that bastard mentality is coming up to me. And I'm like, 'You're an asshole!' He's still working, you know, but he's so intense." >



First (Century) Contact Aliens in 19th century America? Next to these E.T.s, *Cowboys & Aliens'* invaders are late to the party...

27th Century BC

Stargate (1994)

Did you know the Pyramids Of Giza were built by aliens who were worshipped as gods?! So says Roland Emmerich's sandy sci-fi. Although in 10,000 BC, he'd posit they were built 73 centuries earlier. By mammoths.



10th Century BC

AVP: Alien Vs. Predator (2004)

Did you know the Mayan pyramids were built by Predators who were worshipped as gods?! They love a nice, big triangularish monument, do those extra-terrestrials. Just ask out-of-this-world author Erich von Däniken.



1st Century AD

Life Of Brian (1979)

Naughty boy/Messiah-to-be Brian accidentally joyrides a spacecraft piloted by cycloptic aliens while fleeing his Roman oppressors, before they crash back in Jerusalem.



30th Century BC

25th Century BC

20th Century BC

15th Century BC

10th Century BC

5th Century BC

"I don't say much,
instead I have three looks..."

Daniel Craig

8th Century AD

Outlander (2008)

It's Vikings & Aliens! One of whom looks a lot like Jesus (with a haircut), and the other looks a lot like, well, a great big dragon-monster thingy. The Vikings, meanwhile, look reassuringly like Vikings.



14th Century AD

The High Crusade (1994)

John Rhys-Davies and buffoonish medieval-types defeat invading Wersgorixians (yes, seriously) and commandeer their ship to retake the Holy Land – only to land on the planet Tharaxian. This began life as a serious sci-fi novel...



17th Century AD

Alien Vs. Ninja (2010)

Lo-fi splatter-martial-arts-sci-fi in which the title is the plot (if the nouns were plural, that is). Wins this sidebar's Daftest Monster Award for a beast that looks like Giger's critter, via Godzilla mutated with Flipper. **DAN JOLIN**



5th Century AD

10th Century AD

15th Century AD

20th Century AD

25th Century AD

Way of the gun: Loneragan and Dolarhyde raise arms.

"It's a real cowboy movie...
with this added element."

Harrison Ford

Ford hasn't played a cowboy since 1979's *The Frisco Kid*, but he knows a thing or two about aliens. "Yesterday we were talking about reacting to these speeders, and I was saying we should do this and that," says Rockwell. "Then he said something and I was like, 'Oh yeah, why am I talking to you about how to react to flying saucers? You did *Empire Strikes Back*.'"

Judging by *Empire*'s day on set, this is the stuff of thespian dreams. In a break, we find Rockwell in his trailer, watching a DVD of Walter Hill's *The Long Riders*, a Western unique for starring three sets of brothers: the Carradines, Quaid and Keachs ("It's also got a great shot of a horse going through a window," the actor drawls). Wilde, meanwhile, has borrowed from Rockwell a copy of Dustin-Hoffman-as-120-year-old-Indian flick *Little Big Man* ("So weird but totally amazing"). And despite flash-flood evacuation plans posted all over base camp, the weather is perfect. Groundhogs chitter in the brush, hawks soar in the sky. Pure John Ford country.

Craig, who's spent the day scaling a half-built spacecraft (the rest will be painted in digitally) and running through snake-infested scrub, doesn't have much time to enjoy the views. But, by all accounts, his place is the *Cowboys & Aliens* party hub. "He's the captain of the ship," says Rockwell. "He'll build a fire in the backyard and we'll all sit round it with a couple of margaritas." Beach raves: "Daniel laces his salad with mint! Crazy!" Craig himself admits a few nights have got out of hand. "I cook a few steaks and suddenly there are 50 fucking people there. Then I

Buy you a drink?:
Olivia Wilde as
bar girl Ella.



didn't bother and got some catering people in."

Despite the cocktails and silly title on the clapperboard, there's much at stake. Remember those previous stabs at a big-budget sci-fi Western: *Wild Wild West* and *Jonah Hex*? So do the auditors. For DreamWorks, Universal, Paramount and, not least, Favreau, *Cowboys & Aliens* is still a very expensive dice toss.

"The very first day, we rehearsed a big showdown scene," says Beach. "We actors were like, 'Nailed it!' Then Jon took us aside and said, 'Guys, if that's what we're going to do, we should just shut down this movie right now, because we're

going to fail.' Because we were all just doing our childhood tough-cowboy bullshit. It showed us that we had someone who really cares about the movie. And after that, we brought it, man!"

IT'S APRIL, 2011, WHEN *EMPIRE* NEXT MEETS CRAIG. WE'RE IN A LONDON HOTEL AND THE STAR'S DESERT TAN HAS FADED.

"I'm deeply in Stieg Larsson World at the moment," he says, referring to David Fincher's adaptation of *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*,

not a new, seriously depressing theme park. "A lot of sitting in dark rooms and drinking coffee..."

The actor is in high spirits, having recently viewed a rough cut of *Cowboys & Aliens*. "Put it this way, all the Western stuff is working fantastically and you just have to have faith that the guys running around in grey suits with ping-pong balls on their heads are going to look like aliens at some point! I hear Industrial Light & Magic are a pretty good company, so I'm going to chill out about it."

Turns out the set did get hit by a flash flood, after all.

"It got Biblical, mate. Not long after you were there, we had to pick up kit and fucking leg it. One of those big Mack Truck generators got washed away. And the flood hit exactly where we were supposed to rally to! I was thinking, 'That wouldn't have worked — there's a fucking truck floating around there!'"

Still, Craig's memories of playing cowboy are all rosy. "The experience was amazing. I got to wear chaps and be the moody gunslinger staring everyone down. I don't say much, which makes it easier, doesn't it? Instead, I have three looks."

Aside from drunken nights spent probing Ford for *Blade Runner* trivia, his most treasured remembrance is the afternoon he spent galloping across a cacti-spotted plain — a cavalry charge behind him — on his horse, Ringo, who now lives on Ford's Wyoming ranch.

"I loved that horse," Craig says. "I wanted to take him home myself, but I had nowhere to put him." And the saddle-soreness? "You get over that, thankfully. I mean, after a week the scabs heal over. You think I'm fucking joking? Why do you think cowboys walk so fucking funny?"

Ford also has been shown the unfinished assembly. His review? "It's a real cowboy movie, things happen and then it goes back to being a cowboy movie with this added element." Guess we should wait to see the movie, then, Mr Ford.

Time to bust a move: Daniel Craig rocks the mother of all watches.

Both leading men have moved on to other things — Craig to *Dragon Tattoo* and preparing to get his Licence To Kill back on for *Bond 23*; Ford back to Wyoming to feed sugarcubes to Ringo and his own steed, Cooper. Favreau, though, is still in the thick of it. When we call his mobile, he's at San Francisco's Skywalker Ranch, where he's working on the sound mix. Turns out he's swapped Han Solo for C-3PO, having just bumped into Anthony Daniels, who one must assume is kept there with a restraining bolt.

"I'm bouncing across the bridge between here and ILM, getting the last push underway," Favreau says. "When the effects start to rough in, it's really a fun ride. What we're working hardest on is the 'last stand' sequence you saw us begin in New Mexico. It's by far the most ambitious in the movie, but hopefully the most satisfying."

Ballsily, the battle takes place in broad daylight, as flying saucers — or "fliers" —

use space-lassos to yank riders off their horses, while Apache Indians steam in to aid the settlers. "We're doing a little revisionist history," the director smiles.

One thing's for sure: you won't have seen anything like *Cowboys & Aliens* before. (Unless, perhaps, you're the person who watched *The Time Tunnel* or *Oblivion*)

"Our great asset is that we're original," muses Favreau. "It's a very competitive [US] summer, but one filled with superheroes, sequels and reboots. I think having an unfamiliar, star-driven film in 2D will feel refreshing for audiences around the world. I tell you, I'm in the editing room now, looking at Harrison and Daniel up on the screen, and a close-up of them is as compelling as a \$200,000 effects shot. Though we have a couple of those too!"

> *Cowboys & Aliens* is out on August 18 and will be reviewed in a future issue.

Best Westerns

Jon Favreau's starting gift from producer Steven Spielberg? An iPad loaded with classic Westerns. He talks us through the selection...

Stagecoach (1939)

"We have Daniel leaping off his horse and onto a spacecraft, which homages

Stagecoach. It's also a nod to *Raiders Of The Lost Ark's* horse-to-truck leap. Our second-unit director, Terry Leonard, was the stuntman who doubled Harrison for that stunt. Small world."

The Searchers (1956)

"The first thing Steven did was show me a restored print of this.

He's very much a student of the Western, and the first Hollywood person he ever met, when he was 16-years-old, was John Ford. *The Searchers* has an incredible cinematic scope, which we certainly borrowed."

Unforgiven (1992)
"Unforgiven has a real depth. It's not only a comment on Westerns that came before, but on

Clint Eastwood's entire career. So it was an influence. That said, we're a lot more popcorn. If *Raiders* and *Unforgiven* had a baby and it also had alien DNA, that baby would be *Cowboys & Aliens*."

High Noon (1952)

"Filmmaking has changed over the years: *High Noon*, as groundbreaking as it was, was shot entirely on the back lot. What we really did was study the archetypes

and mythology of the Western, then adapt it for our own uses. You may notice that our aliens, when you see their silhouettes, look a little like gunslingers..."

Shane (1953)

"The most realistic depiction of a saloon is probably the one in *Unforgiven* and the one in *My Darling Clementine* is really bustling, but the most fun bar brawl is the one in *Shane*. It's just great. I have the iPad with all these movies on right here, sitting next to me. I feel like a Luddite, holding onto old technology, but I can't give it up for the iPad 2!"

